

# Definition and Meaning of I N R I

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## Definition and Meaning of I N R I

The four letters I N R I commonly appear in connection with Christian symbols, particularly crucifixes, crosses, Bibles, and altars. The meaning of the four letters is simple and well known:

IESVS·NAZARENVS·REX·IVDÆORVM

It is a Latin phrase that means: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” These words come from Gospel accounts of the crucifixion of the migrant Jewish spiritual teacher of the late Second Temple period by the name of *Yeshua bar Yoseph*. That individual is known to the Christian world as *Jesus Christ*.

An examination of those Gospel accounts reveals many interesting details regarding the life and ministry of Yeshua or Jesus. There is much scholarly debate as to the veracity about the majority of them. Among scholars, three issues appear to be settled:

- Jesus was a real person
- Jesus was baptized
- Jesus was crucified

For people of the Christian faith, this list seems very meager, because they approach the matter from a religious perspective.

The first point is that, for the purpose of this study, we can safely assume that Jesus and his crucifixion were historical, not theoretical, events.

The second point is that, since the declaration of Yeshua or Jesus as “IESVS NAZARENVS REX IVDÆORVM” or “INRI” was made in connection with his crucifixion, we know where to look for meaning and how to go about interpreting what we find.

It is common knowledge to any serious student of the New Testament that each Gospel was written at a different time by a different author, and as a result, we can expect similar accounts with differing details.

That is certainly true for the accounts of what Pontius Pilot orders for the sign above Jesus’ head on the cross. See Table 1 on the next page.



*The letters **INRI** atop a crucifix near Mureck in rural Styria, Austria. (Wikipedia)*

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**Table 1: Inscriptions on the cross**

	Mark	Luke
Verse	Mark 15:26	Luke 23:38
Inscription	ο βασιλευς των ιουδαιων	הַיְהוּדִים מֶלֶךְ זֶה ουτος εστιν ο βασιλευς των ιουδαιων HIC·EST·REX·IVDÆORVM
English translation	The King of the Jews	This is the King of the Jews

	Matthew	John
Verse	Matthew 27:37	John 19:19-20
Inscription	ουτος εστιν ιησους ο βασιλευς των ιουδαιων	הַיְהוּדִים וּמֶלֶךְ הַנַּצְרִי יֵשׁוּעַ ιησους ο ναζωραιος ο βασιλευς των ιουδαιων IESVS·NAZARENVS·REX·IVDÆORVM
English translation	This is Jesus, the King of the Jews	Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews

Note: Due to a shortcoming in Microsoft Word, the Hebrew words appear in reverse order in the table.

Observe that only in Luke's and John's Gospels does the wording appear in Latin. Part of the reason is that the Gospels were written in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the day. Only in Luke and John does Pilate specify a sign in multiple languages to identify Jesus.

Only in John's Gospel do the actual words appear, and only in Latin, that give us the letters I N R I. At this point, the reader is encouraged to notice that in no case does any sign on the cross simply use the four letters I N R I. Clearly, the introduction of the four-letter sign was for some artistic or convenience purpose, not to reflect the Gospel account. Considering that literacy rates of Christians started out low and rose slowly over the centuries, using four letters was probably enough reading for most congregations.

## What do the words mean?

IESVS is the Latin form of the Hebrew name יֵשׁוּעַ (Yeshua). Incidentally, the English form of the Hebrew name Yeshua is *Joshua*. That name means *savior*, though not a savior in a soteriological sense (saved from one's sins in God's kingdom) but as a *liberator* in the sense of a military leader in time of conflict. The best example is the Old Testament

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Joshua, who assumed leadership over the Israelites and led them into the Promised Land (Exodus 33:11, Numbers 27:18, Joshua 1:1-9).

**NAZARENVS** means “of Nazareth.” In the first century CE, Nazareth was such a small village in the Galilee region of Northern Palestine that there appears to be no mention of it among any historical records of the time. Galilee was a rural area, and people from there were considered to be unsophisticated and uneducated by the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

While there is a common saying that Jesus was from Nazareth, it does not make the statement true. For example, in Matthew chapter 2, Jesus is born in Bethlehem to fulfill a Messianic prophecy but he grows up in Nazareth to fulfill a different prophecy that actually refers to the Israelite judge Samson (Judges 13:3-5).

NAZARENVS could also refer to a person who had taken the vow of a *Nazirite*. Nazirites were individuals who have taken a vow of service or consecration to God and were called “holy unto the Lord” (Numbers 6:8). The period of the consecration was as short as 30 days or as long as a lifetime. Men and women could become Nazirites, or could be declared such by their parents.

To be a Nazirite was to be an ascetic. Their principle rules were:

- Abstaining from wine, grapes, raisins, alcohol and vinegar
- Refraining from cutting the hair on one’s head
- Avoiding corpses and graves, even those of family members, and any structure that contains them

Samson, a well-known Bible character, was a life-long Nazirite. The rule about letting one’s hair grow explains why Samson lost his superhuman strength when his Philistine girlfriend Delilah gave him a surprise haircut (Judges 16).

At the end of his or her tour of duty, the Nazirite brought sacrifices to the Temple in Jerusalem: A ewe for a sin offering, a lamb for an elevation offering, and a ram as a peace offering; along with a basket of unleavened bread and their grain and drink offerings. After bringing the sacrifices the Nazirite shaved his or her head in the outer courtyard of the Temple.

Some authors have noted that the prophecy in Luke 1:15, “he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb” and the ascetic lifestyle of John the Baptist suggested that he was a Nazirite.

Others go further to suggest that at some time in his life Jesus was also a Nazirite, based on the supposed proof text of Judges 13:3-5 and Matthew 2:23 previously cited. Indeed, the village of Nazareth was unknown in the Old Testament canon. And the Gospel writer, living 60 years later and unable to interview any of the characters in the story, may have added the part about Jesus being raised in the town of Nazareth simply to clean up a loose end.

For those who accept or speculate that the image on the Shroud of Turin is or might be that of the crucified Jesus, there is clear evidence of untrimmed hair and beard. See the photograph on the next page. That is the topic of a separate study.

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**REX** is the Latin word for king. The Hebrew and Aramaic word for king is מֶלֶךְ (melech). During Jesus' lifetime, Judea was a Roman province under a Roman Governor, while Herod Antipas ruled Galilee. Antipas was the son Herod the Great, an Idumean, who married into the Jewish ruling family but owed his appointment as procurator of Judea to Julius Caesar in 47 BCE. Ten years later, the Roman Senate conferred upon Herod the title "King of the Jews."

All four Gospels provide an account of Jesus before Pilate. But only John's Gospel reports any conversation between the two men.

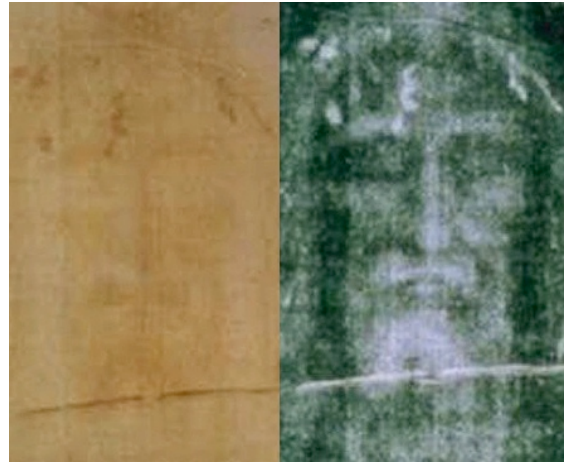
Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answers, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked, "What is truth?" (John 18:33-38)

Several important issues are brought to light in this conversation. First, these two men are on two different levels philosophically. Pilate hears Jesus' words but has no idea what he is saying. Pilate thinks of the Jews as "them," the people he was sent to manage in a place he would rather not be. He suffers from the same xenophobia as the rest of us, the familiar assumption, "aren't they all the same?"

For those who have studied Kabbalah, Jesus' words reveal a clear alternative meaning. "My malkuth (kingdom) is not from this olam (world). Malkuth is the lowest of the Sephiroth on the Tree of Life, the only one connected with the Olam ha Asiyah or World of Action, the existence that humans know as physical reality. See the graphic on the next page. Jesus was not speaking of some nebulous Sunday School concept of a coming kingdom, rather he has a very specific concept in mind, one that still challenges us today to fully understand.

Later in the same chapter of John, Pilate, though he did not understand Jesus, apparently realized that he was a person of significance. Over the objections of religious establishment, Pilate conferred upon Jesus the same title that the Roman Senate once conferred upon Herod the Great: King of the Jews.

One of the goals of the Gospels is to convince the reader that Jesus is the Messiah, that is the "Anointed One." The idea of anointing somebody runs throughout Old Testament times and was practiced by all societies of the time. Kings were anointed with oil as a symbolic transmission of divine blessing and power. In ancient Israel, the recipient of this action was known as מָשִׁיחַ (Meshiach) or Messiah. In the first century CE, the hope was for a new leader, a descendant of King David, who would lead what was left of



*The face, natural on the left and photo-negative on the right, from the Shroud of Turin. (Wikipedia)*

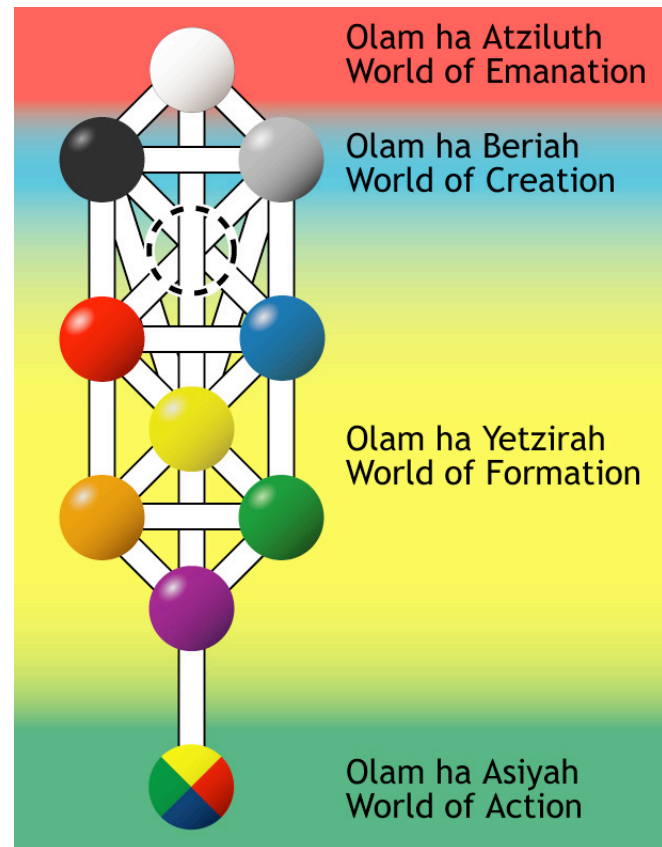
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Israel in a successful military rebellion against Rome to restore political independence to Galilee and Judea.

Some people heard Jesus' message of a coming Kingdom of God and mistook his message as the sign of the Messiah. Jesus did not claim to be that Messiah, unlike many others who attempted and failed to defeat Rome. Nevertheless, the Gospel writers tried to use the Old Testament prophecies of Messiah as proof texts for Jesus.

In the Greek, Messiah, or Anointed One is Χριστός (Christos). This is the origin or the title "Christ." The details of the role, qualifications, and expectations of Messiah are beyond the scope of this study. We can say simply that the Jesus of the Bible does not meet the job description for the Jewish Messiah.

The job description for Christian Messiah or Christ was developed over the centuries after Jesus' life, to fit the image that the people and the Church had formed of him. Unfortunately, the historical Jesus probably did not meet that job description either. Whether Jewish Messiah or Christian Christ, both jobs truly call for a King among kings.



*The Kabbalistic Tree of Life with Malkuth, the four-color Sephirah at the bottom.*

**IVDÆORVM** means "of the Jews." Who are the Jews? From the Roman point-of-view, the Jews are the people from the province of Judea. There was little interest in the religious preference of the people who lived in Judea or anywhere else in the Roman empire so long as order was maintained and taxes were paid.

Beginning with the Book of Genesis, there is the story of Abraham, a Mesopotamian, faithful to the voice of El Shaddai (God Almighty) who made a special covenant with him (Genesis 17). A portion of Abraham's descendants, known as the Hebrews or Israelites, live in the area of Palestine and become a strong nation around the tenth century BCE under Kings David and Solomon.

Eventually, the nation divides and weakens, then succumbs to the Assyrians in 722 BCE followed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The Persians conquer the Babylonians and eventually allow the people to return to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. But only a limited number of people actually go. As a result, but the time of Jesus, the Hebrew or Israelite people have spread around the Mediterranean Sea and the Middle East.



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The territory given to the tribe of Judah, later known as the land of Judea, has lent its name to its children, today known as the Jews. But they are not just people from Judea, Palestine or Israel. They are people, a religion, and a tradition found in all parts of the world.

## Questions & Answers

*Why did they use the letter I instead of the letter J?*

There was no letter J in the Roman alphabet. Nor was there a J in the Hebrew or Greek alphabets. The letter J first came into use when this story was translated into German, where the letter J makes the sound of the English Y.

*Why do the paintings show a sign that says INRI when the Bible says the sign had complete words?*

Using the letters INRI, like using the letters IHS for Jesus or In Hoc Signo (in this sign – meaning the sign of the cross) became a form of symbolism common in the Christian Church. The artists merely followed the same convention.

*Is INRI universal in all Christian Churches?*

Not at all. In Greek Orthodox Churches, they use the New Testament in the original Greek language. There, it says ιησους ο ναζωραιος ο βασιλευς των ιουδαιων which results in the letters INBI. βασιλευς (Basileus) is the word used for King.

*Are there other interpretations for the letters INRI?*

Yes. The fact that there are four letters, and that Jesus is connected with the Divine, leads many people to connect INRI with the tetragrammaton (יהוה or YHVH) the sacred name of God from the Old Testament.

The Rosicrucians used them as the initials of one of their Hermetic secrets:

Igne Natura Rerum vatur Integras

Meaning that by fire, nature is perfectly renewed.

They also adopted them to express the names of their three elementary principles salt, sulphur, and mercury by making them the initials of the sentence:

Igne Nitrum Roris Invenitur

Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry gives the following use in the equivalent English letters of the initials of the Hebrew names of the ancient elements:

laminim, water; Nour, fire; Ruach, air; and lebschah, earth

Unfortunately, there is some difficulty verifying these words. The closest results are as follows:

water = מִם (mim)    fire = נֹר (nour)    air = רוּחַ (ruach)    earth = אֲדָמָה (adamah)

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## References

Most of the information used in this paper can found on Wikipedia:

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- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazirite>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical\\_Jesus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_Jesus)
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity\\_of\\_Jesus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity_of_Jesus)

Other helpful online references include:

- <http://www.biblegateway.com/> The Bible online in multiple English versions as well as other languages, with search capability.
- <http://www.masonicdictionary.com/inri.html> A Masonic reference website.
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